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ABSTRACT

The University 101 course seeks to create an attitude among freshmen that helps them appreciate the value of higher education, to point the way to university resources that will allow them to develop to their fullest potential, and thereby to cause more of them to survive the freshman year. This study of first-term freshmen at Tennessee Technological University in 1987-88 and the two academic years following found that 257 (approximately 93 percent) of 276 students who enrolled in the University 101 course re-enrolled for the following term, while 84.8 percent of other first-year freshmen re-enrolled. Little or no significance was found in the relationship of sex, race, American College Testing composite score, or high school grade point average to retention rates. The study concludes that when a university focuses on improved programs and services that contribute to student satisfaction and success rather than focusing on student retention, students are more satisfied and remain in school longer. Recommendations are offered for improvement of the University 101 program. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

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AN EXAMINATION OF COLLEGE RETENTION RATES WITH A UNIVERSITY 101 PROGRAM

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November, 1994

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Introduction

In recent years, student retention and student satisfaction with the college experience have become issues of utmost importance for campus officials. Many college and university administrators are looking at retention rates as a key indicator about something broadly defined as "institutional effectiveness" (Astin, 1987). Institutional effectiveness deals with an educational institution meeting the needs of its students in all areas of those students' educational experiences. Such areas include academic, career, and social aspects. According to McCroskey (1989), student retention and success at the university level are dependent upon two major factors learned by the students: "academic success" and "interpersonal success." The former is an area on which institutions of higher education have concentrated for centuries; however, the importance of interpersonal skills, as related to student retention, has only recently come to the attention of university administrators. Although student retention is both a social and an economic issue, it has been the economic importance that has brought it to the forefront. Threats of demographic decline in student enrollment have forced university personnel to place retention concerns at the top of their lists of priorities, for without students remaining in school, administrators have no school in which to administer.

In years past, the college experience was one primarily of academic instruction, but today's student looks at college as much more than academia. Many students, whom years ago would not have had a chance to pursue higher education, may now enroll at a major university. "Student populations are changing from academically skilled, middle-class youths to students with a more complicated mix of academic

preparation, age, socioeconomic backgrounds, and reasons for enrolling in college" (Gordon, 1984). The pursuit of a college degree is very near and dear to many graduating high school seniors. But how many of those who begin college actually graduate with a degree? How many stay even a year or a semester?

The beginning of a college career can be an awesome event in the life of a new high school graduate. Higher education institutions must realize this fear and must take the necessary steps to alleviate any problems that new students might have.

> More than ever before, new students need help during the transition from high school or work to the college environment. In most institutions there are numerous and diverse academic options from which to choose. Career planning has become more complex, and relationships between academic majors and occupations are not as clear as most students assume (Gordon, 1984).

Many other choices face college students. They are concerned with tasks such as becoming independent, developing physical and intellectual competence, and developing interpersonal skills (Chickering, 1969).

> Success in this area of interpersonal skills involves the communicative and social skills the student brings to the university as well as the continued successful development of those skills at the university. Students who achieve academically and interpersonally will persist and graduate at a much higher rate than students who fail on one or both of these factors (McCrowskey, 1989).

Without assistance many students will be included in the attrition statistics that are so prevalent in higher education today. According to Noel (1985) student retention should not be the goal of colleges, but rather the result of improved programs and services that contribute to student satisfaction and success. Many colleges and universities are making attempts to introduce students to the college environment more effectively. Students give a plethora of reasons and excuses for dropping out of school. A few such reasons are in the areas of university housing, academics, social life, academic advisement, and simply a fear of university life. "Students are most satisfied during their undergraduate years with courses in their majors and with library facilities. They are least satisfied with personal services such as career counseling and advising, academic advising, financial aid, and job placement" (Astin, 1987). Some researchers, such as Herndon (1984) and Waldo (1986) place an emphasis on university housing, stating that those who live on-campus succeed in academics at a higher level than do those who live off-campus. Others such Astin (1987) refute this theory.

"Research on student retention indicates that attrition is heaviest during the freshman year and at the end of this year" (Eckland, 1964). One vehicle for helping students experience the transition period from high school to college is the freshman seminar course.

The University 101 course is a freshman seminar course aimed at helping students succeed. The course originally began as an educational experiment in 1972 to revitalize the freshman year at the University of South Carolina (USC).

The overriding philosophy behind University 101 was and continues to be the creation of an attitude among freshmen that

will make them appreciate the value of higher education, point the way to university resources that will allow them to develop to their fullest potential, and thereby cause more of them to survive the freshman year (Jewler, 1987).

Although University 101 began as an experimental project at USC, its results quickly proved to be encouraging to faculty and administrators.

> In general, freshmen who participated in University 101 had a higher probability of returning for the sophomore year. From 1973 to 1986, survival rates for University 101 participants ranged from 77.2% to 84.5% while survival rates for non-participants ranged from 73.2 % to 80.0%. In ten of the fourteen years studied, the difference in survival rates between University 101 participants and non-participants attained significance. In the four remaining years, participants also tended to attain higher survival rates. In summary, these data support a positive association between participation in University 101 and enhanced survival rates (Fidler, 1987).

Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that those students who complete the University 101 course at TTU are more likely to remain in school than are those students who do not participate in the program. The University 101 program was introduced to faculty and students at TTU in the fall quarter of 1987 and has been taught each consecutive fall term and some spring terms since that time. The study will track both students who have taken the 101 course and those who have not taken the course to determine their rates of return for one term and for one year.

Hypothesis and Specific Goals

As previously stated, the primary hypothesis of this study is that those students who complete the University 101 course at TTU are more likely to remain in school than are those students who do not participate in the program. However, there are other specific goals which this study will attempt to reach. Some questions that the study will attempt to answer are as follows:

1. Do white students remain in school at a higher rate than black students?
2. Do male students remain in school at a higher rate than female students?
3. Do higher ACT composite scores predict higher retention rates?
4. Do higher high school grade point averages predict higher retention rates?

Instruments

Most data on University 101 students were gathered individually from the VAX component of the mainframe computer system at TTU. Various screen numbers give the viewer an assortment of personal and school-related information. The original listing of University 101 students used in acquiring the data came from the grade reports for University 101 students since the fall quarter of 1987. These grade reports were secured from the TTU Office of Records and Registration. The information concerning the general freshman population was also gathered from the VAX system but was acquired through the administrative assistant to the Vice President for Student Services.

Subjects

University 101 classrooms are comprised primarily of first or second term freshmen; however, some upperclassmen who are transfer students or who just want to know more about the university take the course. These "non-freshmen" were not used in gathering data. For every non-freshman in a University 101 class, the total number of University 101 students was diminished by one. The subjects used for the general freshman population data were first term freshmen.

Data Collection

The following information was gathered for those first or second term freshmen who had taken a University 101 course: name, social security number, term entered, last term attended, high school GPA, ACT composite score, cumulative college GPA, race, and sex. These data were gathered by individually pulling up each student's record from the computer files.

The information for the general freshman population was attempted to be gathered through the Admissions Supervisor in the TTU Office of Admissions. The supervisor attempted to write a program that would show students enrolled in the fall quarter of 1988 who had enrolled for their first term in the fall quarter of 1987. The same would be done for those who had enrolled for their first term in the fall quarter of 1988 and the fall semester of 1989. The computer program ran for 6 hours with little progress; therefore, a small bit of information was gathered from some previous research done by the administrative assistant to the Vice President for Student Services. This information was not nearly as extensive as was needed for this study of retention.

Results

Although much information was gathered on the freshmen students enrolled in University 101 classes, the most important, of course, is the retention rate. In the 1987-88 academic year, 276 freshmen enrolled in 15 sections of the University 101 course. Of these 276 students, 257 (93.1%) re-enrolled for the following term. According to research done by the Office of Vice President for Student Services, this compares with 84.8% of other first year freshmen who started in the 1987 fall term and subsequently enrolled for the following term. According to a computerized Chi-squared test called *The Research Assistant*, this is a weak significant difference at the .10 level.

In the 1988-89 academic year, 291 freshmen enrolled in 18 sections of University 101. Of these 291 students, 271 (93.1%) re-enrolled for the following term. Two hundred fifty of these students (86%) remained in school at least one academic year. In the 1989-90 academic year, 205 freshmen enrolled in University 101. Of these, 187 (91.2%) enrolled for the following term. The slight decrease from the previous years might be attributed to the changing of quarter terms to semester terms by TTU starting in the fall of 1989. As previously mentioned, the data concerning the general freshman population for the 1988-89 and 1989-90 academic years were unattainable.

Many areas other than retention were studied. These topics were listed in the "specific goals" section of this study and dealt with the effects of sex, race, ACT composite scores, and high school GPA.

In the area of sex, research shows that male students who were enrolled in University 101 left the university at a slightly higher rate than

did female students; however, this difference was not found to be significant.

Results regarding minority students are limited because so few minorities have taken the University 101 course. From the fall quarter of 1987 to the fall semester of 1990, only 39 black freshmen enrolled in the course, as opposed to 454 white freshman. Research shows that white students who were enrolled in the University 101 course left the university at a higher rate; however, again the conclusions that can be drawn from this data are not very informative.

In response to the question of ACT composite scores predicting student retention, research shows that the higher the student's ACT composite score, the less likely that student is to withdraw from the university; however, again these differences were not found to be significant for students enrolled in University 101.

In the area of high school GPA, research shows information similar to that gathered from ACT composite scores. As was expected, those students who entered college with higher high school GPA's were more likely to remain in school than were those with lower GPA's. These differences were also not found to be significant with those students who enrolled in University 101.

Conclusions

Research shows an increase of retention rate in those students who have completed the University 101 course as opposed to those who have not completed the course. This difference occurs at a .10 level of significance. Little or no significance was found in the relationships of sex, race, ACT composite score, and high school GPA to retention rates.

According to experts within the realm of college student personnel, many factors relate to the length of time that a student remains in college. Some of these factors are university housing, academic advisement, social life, and familiarity with university support services. All of these areas are covered in the University 101 course at TTU.

The University of South Carolina has made incredible progress in developing a freshman seminar program to ease the transition from high school to college. When a university focuses on improved programs and services that contribute to student satisfaction and success rather than focusing on student retention, students are more satisfied and, in turn, remain in school longer. With the University 101 program, TTU is attempting to show new freshmen that it cares about the success and well-being of its students.

Recommendations

Continued research is necessary to verify the necessity of the University 101 program at TTU. Data should be gathered and analyzed at the close of every semester. When possible, further research should be conducted to trace retention rates of University 101 students throughout their sophomore, junior, and senior years, and statistics regarding the relationship of University 101 and graduation should be considered.

Selection of teachers for the University 101 course should be a top priority. The director of the program should carefully select the faculty members who show a deep concern for students and a willingness to see new students succeed in the college atmosphere.

The director should effectively communicate with all departments on the campus to insure that academic advisors are aware of the

University 101 program. Advisors should understand the reasons for installing such a program on campus and the effects that the program has on students.

A type of brainstorming session should be developed at the end of each term that University 101 is taught. This session would be a time for faculty members to get together and discuss what worked well and what did not work well in their classrooms. It would also give teachers a variety of ideas to use in the future.

The direction of the University 101 program should be taken out from under a graduate assistant and placed under a full-time administration member. The amount of work far surpasses that which should be required of a graduate assistant, and a full-time administrator working on the program would certainly enhance its organization and effectiveness.

Colleges and universities must now show a serious commitment to this program if they expect it to work. Administrators and advisors should make University 101 a required course for all new freshmen, and they should also provide similar orientation classes for special groups of students such as non-traditional students, honors program students, and academically at-risk students.

University 101 is by no means a new concept, but the freshman seminar program has become more popular in recent years. The course has proven to be an effective weapon in the war against college drop out rates (Smitten, 1992). It has created a more pleasant atmosphere in which teachers can teach and students can learn. The University 101 program is a win-win situation. The university wins by keeping more students enrolled at their institution, and the students win by creating for themselves a more fulfilling college experience.

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